

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 /026 W

----- 010371

O 080805Z NOV 76

FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0432

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SEOUL 8919

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT KS US

SUBJ: KOREAN ATMOSPHERICS

SUMMARY: UNTIL JUST RECENTLY, KOREANS HAVE BEEN IN BOUYANT CONFIDENT MOOD AS A RESULT OF SERIES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS, PARTICULARLY IMPROVEMENTS IN SECURITY AND ECONOMIC SITUATIONS. IMMEDIATE SHORT-TERM PICTURE, HOWEVER, NOW PARTIALLY CLOUDED BY CONTINUING PRESS REPORTS OF ALLEGED KOREAN MIDCONDUCT IN U.S. AND CONCERNS REGARDICW POLICIES TOWARDS KOREA OF PRESIDENT-ELECT CARTER. LINKAGE OF ALLEGED MIDCONDUCT TO PRESIDENT PARK PERSONALLY HAS CREATED MOST CONCERN. EXPECTATION IS STILL THAT IN SHORT-TERM KOREAN GOVERNMENT WILL MOVE TO REPAIR IMAGE IN U.S. RATHER THAN TAKING RETALIATORY STEPS. END SUMMARY.

1. SINCE MY RETURN HERE SOME FOUR WEEKS AGO, I HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE MOST OF THE TOP LEADERSHIP OF ROKG, INCLUDING PRESIDENT PARK, AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF LESSER LIGHTS. PUTTING THESE IMPRESSIONS TOGETHER WITH OTHER INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO EMBASSY, INITIALLY DURING THIS PERIOD, ONE FOUND A BOUYANT, CONFIDENT ATTITUDE DISPLAYED, PARTICULARLY BY THOSE IN POWER. INDEED THERE WAS A NOTE OF COCKINESS, NOT UNUSUAL FOR THE SUCCESSFUL KOREAN.

2. REASONS FOR CONFIDENT MOOD, WHICH WAS TYPIFIED BY AN UNUSUALLY RELAXED DEMEANOR ON PART OF PRESIDENT PARK DURING CALLS BY GENERAL VESSEY AND SECRETARY OF AIR FORCE REED, ARE NOT DIFFICULT TO DISCERN. FOUR FACTORS EXPLAIN THIS MOOD: FIRST AND

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FOREMOST, IMPROVED SECURITY; SECONDLY, BOOM IN 1976 ECONOMY;

AND OF LESSER IMPORTANCE, DIPLOMATIC GAINS VIS-A-VIS NORTH KOREAN AND QUIESCENT POLITICAL SITUATION.

3. KOREANS PERCEIVE IMMEDIATE NORTH KOREAN THREAT AS DIMINISHED AND SECURITY SITUATION AS MORE COMFORTING IN WAKE OF AUGUST 18 INCIDENT. ROKS RECOGNIZE THAT U.S. DELIVERED ON ITS COMMITMENT AND WITH BROAD U.S. PUBLIC SUPPORT AND THAT THE NORTH FLINCHED IN FACE US/ROK DETERMINED POSTURE AND CLOSE COOPERATION. I FOUND NO REMNANT OF ATTITUDE PREVALENT IN EARLY SEPTEMBER THAT U.S. SHOULD HAVE RETALIATED WITH SECOND BLOW AT NORTH. IN FACT, SENIOR CONFIDANT OF PRESIDENT PARK PRAISED OUR RESPONSE AS PROPERLY "RESTRAINED." HOWEVER, THESE VIEWS MAY HAVE BEEN VOICED FOR OUR BENEFIT AND MAY SHIELD CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR RETALIATORY MEASURES IN CASE OF FUTURE NORTH KOREAN PROVOCATIONS.

4. SECONDLY, ECONOMIC PICTURE COULD NOT BE BRIGHTER AND MORE ENCOURAGING. ALL GOALS FOR 1976 HAVE BEEN FAR SURPASSED, WITH EXPORTS UP OVER 60 PERCENT AND GROWTH LIKELY TO BE ABOUT 15 PERCENT. ON TOP OF THIS THERE HAVE BEEN RECORD RICE AND BARLEY CROPS, WHICH WILL BE BOOM TO FARM INCOME. FUTURE LOOKS EQUALLY BRIGHT, IF WHOLE ECONOMY HOLDS UP. THERE IS MUCH JUSTIFIED PRIDE AND A BIT OF BOASTING ABOUT THIS ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE.

5. THIRD, POLITICAL SITUATION COULD HARDLY BE MORE TO LIKING OF PRESIDENT PARK AND KOREAN ESTABLISHMENT. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY IS QUIESCENT AND TECHNOCRAT MINISTERS, WHO HAVE LITTLE TASTE FOR NATIONAL ASSEMBLY QUESTIONING, ARE GETTING OFF VERY LIGHTLY-- WITH POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF FINANCE MINISTER, WHO BEARS BRUNT OF ASSEMBLY PRESSURE ON TAX ISSUE. OTHER OPPOSITION GROUPS-- CHURCH, STUDENTS, INTELLECTUALS--ARE ALMOST DORMANT, COWED BY WEIGHT OF ROKG PRESSURES, AND FINDING LITTLE ACTIVE SUPPORT FROM A PUBLIC ENJOYING BENEFITS OF IMPROVED SECURITY AND ECONOMIC SURGE. TYPICALLY, KIM DONG IL, A MAJOR OPPOSITION INTELLECTUAL, IS QUIETLY CHURNING OUT BOOKS WITH HIS LATEST ON PRESIDENTIAL HUMOR (NOT INCLUDING OF COURSE PRESIDENT PARK). HE COMMENTED TO ME, INCIDENTALLY, THAT HE HAS BEEN STRUCK AT BY LACK OF PUBLIC INTEREST IN OR SUPPORT FOR KIM DAE JUNG AND OTHER MYONGDONG DEFENDENTS.

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6. FINALLY, NORTH KOREA'S DETERIORATING INTERNATIONAL POSITION, MARKED BY DEFAULTING ON ITS FOREIGN DEBT, BY WITHDRAWAL OF ITS UNGA RESOLUTION, AND CAPPED BY SMUGGLING SCANDALS, ARE OBVIOUSLY SOURCE OF LOCAL SATISFACTION. FOREIGN MINISTRY ADMITTEDLY FINDS IDLE TIME ON ITS HANDS SINCE ITS DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY HAS BEEN SO WHOLLY FOCUSED ON ANNUAL UNGA DEBATE. IN THIS AREA A WELL, US ROLE IS MUCH APPRECIATED.

7. KOREAN CONFIDENCE, EVEN EUPHORIA, WITH PRESENT STATE OF "KOREAN WORLD" IS, AT SAME TIME, LEAVENED IN SOME QUARTERS BY LONGER-TERM WORRIES. DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER NAM REMAINS CONCERNED WITH ECONOMIC HEALTH OF U.S. AND JAPAN, WITH MAINTAINING GROWTH ON MORE EVEN PATTERN, AND WITH POTENTIAL IMPACT OF HIGHER OIL PRICES. I FOUND A MORE DEEP-SEATED ANXIETY, ONLY CAREFULLY SURFACED, AMONG SOME POLITICAL LEADERS WITH RESPECT TO GRADUALLY INCREASING POLITICAL CONTROLS LEVERED BY BLUE HOUSE. SPEAKER CHUNG IL KWON WAS, FOR EXAMPLE, DEEPLY UNHAPPY WITH GROWING LACK OF POLITICAL OUTLETS. BUT, NO ONE APPARENTLY SEES ANY SHORT-TERM PROSPECT OF CHANGE OR IS PREPARED TO CHALLENGE PRESIDENT PARK OR THE YUSHIN SYSTEM RIGHT NOW. SPECTRE OF AIDING NORTH KOREAN CAUSE, EVEN INDIRECTLY, STILL INHIBITS THOSE WITH DISTASTE FOR PRESIDENT PARK'S TIGHT CONTROLS. AS KANG MUNG PON CASE NEWLY ILLUSTRATES, PENALTIES FOR EVEN HIGH LEVEL FIGURES WHO STEP TOO FAR OFF PARK LINE CAN BE SEVERE. FURTHERMORE, PARK'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR KOREA'S BENEFIT ARE WIDELY RESPECTED AND BECAUSE OF THIS AND PARK'S ISOLATION OF POTENTIAL POLITICAL RIVALS FEW SEE ANY ADEQUATE SUBSTITUTE ON SCENE. HOPE AT PRESENT IS FOR MORE RELAXED SYSTEM, BUT UNDER PARK.

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 /026 W
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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0433

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SEOUL 8919

EXDIS

8. OTHERWISE BRIGHT SHORT-TERM PICTURE, IN KOREAN ESTABLISHMENT'S EYES, IS, HOWEVER, NOW PARTLY CLOUDED BY TWO RECENT DEVELOPMENTS, WHICH CUT TO CORE OF VITAL US RELATIONSHIP: ALLEGATIONS OF ILLEGAL KOREAN ACTIVITY IN U.S. AND ELECTION OF GOVERNOR CARTER. PRESS REPORTS HIGHLY CRITICAL OF KOREAN ACTIVITY IN U.S., WHOSE GENERAL VERACITY FEW CHALLENGE, HAVE STUNG AND EMBARRASSED KNOWLEDGABLE KOREANS. BEYOND THIS, THERE IS GENUINE CONCERN AMONG SUCH FIGURES AS SPEAKER CHONG AND FOREIGN MINISTER

THAT KOREAN REPUTATION IN U.S. COULD BECOME BADLY MARRED TO POINT WHERE FUNDAMENTAL US/ROK RELATIONSHIP COULD BE SERIOUSLY DAMAGED. ON OTHER HAND, REPORTS LINKING PRESIDENT PARK TO ALLEGED SCANDALS ARE WIDELY RESENTED AND WERE EVEN VIEWED BY SOME AS EFFORT BY ADMINISTRATION TO JOIN U.S. CRITICS OF PRESIDENT PARK. ELECTION OF GOVERNOR CARTER APPEARS LIKELY HEIGHTEN KOREAN NERVOUSNESS ABOUT ITS STANDING IN U.S. AND FUTURE OF BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, PRIMARILY BECAUSE PRESIDENT-ELECT CARTER IS UNKNOWN QUANTITY BUT ALSO DUE TO HIS DISCUSSION OF POSSIBLE U.S. TROOP AND NUCLEAR WITHDRAWALS AND HIS EMPHASIS ON HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES, WHICH CONCERNS ESTABLISHMENT BUT ENCOURAGES OTHERS.

9. HOW PRESIDENT PARK WILL RESOLVE THESE VARIOUS POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN HIS MIND IS MAJOR CURRENT QUESTION. CRITICAL FACTOR WILL BE HOW HE REACTS TO ALLEGATIONS LINKING HIM PERSONALLY TO LOBBYING ACTIVITIES. I EXPECT HE WILL REACT IN ACCORD WITH PAST PATTERNS--THAT IS TO SAY THE REAL NECESSITY FOR CONTINUING TO MAINTAIN CLOSE TIES WITH THE UNITED STATES WILL FORCE THE PRESIDENT TO CONTAIN HIS ANGER AND GIEVENT HIM FROM LASHING BACK AT US BECAUSE OUR PRESS IS QUESTIONING HIS CONFIDENTIAL

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PERSONAL INTEGRITY. MILITARY AND OTHER ESTABLISHMENT ELEMENTS ARE NOT LIKELY TO LOOK WITH FAVOR ON ACTIONS BY PARK WHICH COULD RISK SERIOUS U.S.-ROK BREACH OVER THIS ISSUE, GIVEN THEIR STAKE IN U.S. MILITARY AND ECONOMIC SUPPORT. FURTHERMORE, OUR ASSURANCES TO PARK SHOULD ALSO EASE HIS PERSONAL UNHAPPINESS.

10. NEVERTHELESS, CONTINUING AND/OR WIDENING ATTACKS ON PARK PERSONALLY, PARTICULARLY IF PERCEIVED BY HIM AS HAVING SOME FORM OF USG OFFICIAL SUPPORT, COULD IMPEL HIM TO TAKE RETALIATORY ACTION. RECENT POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS MIGHT JUST ENCOURAGE NOTION THAT KOREA CAN AFFORD TO BE MORE INDEPENDENT AND STRONG REACTION BY PARK COULD WELL DRAW BROAD CHAUVINISTIC SUPPORT FROM KOREANS OF ALL ILK, WHO WOULD FEEL "THEIR PRESIDENT" UNFAIRLY ATTACKED. HOWEVER, WE CONSIDER IT FAR MORE LIKELY THAT, AT PRESENT JUNCTURE, PRESIDENT PARK WILL STOP SHORT OF JEOPARDIZING HIS TIES WITH U.S. ON OTHER HAND, IN LONGER RUN, AMERICAN ATTACKS ON PARK HIMSELF, DEPENDING ON THEIR SERIOUSNESS, CAN ONLY REINFORCE PARK'S FRUSTRATION AT OUR CONTROL AND AT HIS DEPENDENCE ON US AND HEIGHTEN HIS DESIRE AND EFFORTS TO LOOSEN TIES.

11. PARTICULARLY IF ISSUE INVOLVING PARK PERSONALLY CAN BE CONTAINED, CURRENT SITUATION PROVIDES SOME POSITIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR US. CRITICISM OF KOREAN LOBBYING ACTIVITIES HAS BROUGHT HOME ONCE AGAIN TO KOREANS CENTRALITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH US, NO MATTER HOW FRUSTRATING THIS DEPENDENCE MAY BE. HOPEFULLY, KOREANS MAY HAVE LEARNED LESSON HARD WAY THAT INQUITOUS LOBBYING PRACTICES, ABOUT WHICH THEY HAD AMPLE WARNING, MUST CEASE AND DESIST. BEYOND THAT, THEY MAY WELL BE STIMULATED

TO REFURBISH THEIR DAMAGED REPUTATION, CERTAINLY BY TRYING AT
FIRST TO RATIONALIZE THEIR POLICIES ON HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES
AND THEN, WHEN IT BECOMES CLEAR ONLY ACTIONS, NOT WORDS,
WILL BE ACCEPTABLE, POSSIBLY BY POSITIVE, CONCILIATORY MEASURES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY, ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, CORRUPTION, INVESTIGATIONS, ALLEGATIONS, THREATS, PUBLIC ATTITUDES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 NOV 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: KelleyW0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976SEOUL08919
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760415-0846
From: SEOUL
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19761170/aaaacitj.tel
Line Count: 228
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: KelleyW0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 01 JUN 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <01 JUN 2004 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <27 SEP 2004 by KelleyW0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: KOREAN ATMOSPHERICS SUMMARY: UNTIL JUST RECENTLY, KOREANS HAVE BEEN IN BOUYANT CONFIDENT MOOD AS A RESULT OF SERIES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS
TAGS: PINT, KS, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006